

HELEN KELLER - REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALIST

by

Peter Ridley

HV1624  
15282  
R438 1979



**M.C. MIGEL MEMORIAL LIBRARY**  
**American Foundation for the Blind**

15 West 16th Street, New York, New York

10011

C.2

Page 20, TOUCHSTONE, March, 1979

vol 2, no. 3

## HELEN KELLER - REVOLUTIONARY SOCIALIST



HV1624

K282

R438

copy two



by Peter Ridley

All the Western world knows of Helen Keller, the deaf and blind child who rose to international prominence through her successful self-education and iron self-discipline. She has since become the model and symbol for millions of disabled people throughout the world. She has also inspired, unfortunately, many sugary and sentimental tracts about the virtues of perseverance and Christian Virtue, with little resemblance to that fiery, impassioned fighter for social justice. These tracts can be seen littering the shelves of any corner drugstore.

The other side of Helen Keller can, however, be gathered from her speeches and writings of the years mainly between 1911-1930. A collection of these writings has been edited by Phillip Foner under the title, "Helen Keller, Her Socialist Years". The truth is, despite the conspiracy of silence on this aspect of her life, that Helen Keller remained, for most of her adult life, a committed revolutionary and socialist militant. A far cry from the dime store surrogate!

Helen Keller was born June 27, 1880 in Alabama, and after an illness at the age of 19 months, remained deaf and blind. She was left, as she later described herself, "A phantom living in a no-world". Through the selfless devotion of her teacher and companion, Anne Sullivan, she taught herself to read, and write, eventually graduating with full honours from Radcliffe College. She learned to read German, Latin, Greek, and French. In 1902 she published her first book, "The Story of My Life" which became an immediate bestseller in fifty languages.

Helen Keller became interested in socialism through a friend of her tutor, John Macy. Macy gave her books by H.G. Wells, Marx, Engels, and Trotsky, as well as socialist current periodicals. Keller was convinced less



## Manuge Galleries Limited

- We specialize in Canadian paintings of the 19th and 20th centuries.
- Our collection includes work by Group of Seven, Robert Pilot, Goodridge Roberts, Alan Collier, Tom Forrestall, Christopher Pratt, John Little, Jean Edmonds Hancock, Gary Morton, Hilton Hassell, Carl Zimmerman and many others.
- In our marine collection we have paintings by Montague Dawson, Henry Scott, R.B. Spencer, W.H. Yorke, Jack L. Gray and others.

1674 Hollis St., Halifax, N.S. Canada  
Telephone: (902) 423-6315 Cable: ESMAN


by the publication than by her own observations after having walked through the industrial slums of America with Anne Sullivan. She became appalled by the hopeless squalor of the hideous tenements inhabited by the large families of the urban poor.

Her special interest in the blind made her conscious that it was no mere accident that caused the wide incidence of blindness among workers and their children. Or as she put it, "Too much blindness is traceable to wrong industrial conditions and the greed of employers."

Socialists, of course, welcomed Helen Keller into their ranks as a valued ally and propagandist whose intellectual powers could only further their cause. Their opponents, however, and particularly the capitalist press, were quick to charge that the socialists were using and exploiting a poor blind and deaf girl for her prestige value.

In reply to these charges, Keller wrote "How I Became a Socialist" [1912] in which she told of her conversion to socialism. "I am no worshipper of cloth of any colour," she wrote, "but I love the red flag and what it symbolizes to me and other socialists."

Helen Keller's socialist views sprang from a very obvious comparison with and deep feeling for the poor, the unemployed, the outcast, and of course, her fellow disabled. She



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2016 with funding from  
American Printing House for the Blind, Inc.

<https://archive.org/details/helenkellerrevol00hele>



Page 22. TOUCHSTONE, March, 1979

was aware of the grave injustices inherent in the fact that all social wealth was created by the workers, while it was owned and pocketed by the rich who were the ones in authority. "At the bidding of a single hand, thousands march to produce or hang idle. Amazing that hands which produce nothing should be exalted and jewelled with authority! In yonder town the textile mills are idle and the people want shoes. Fifty miles away, in another town, the shoe factories are silent and the people want cloth. Between these two arrested forces of production is that record of profits and losses called The Market. The buyers of clothes and shoes in The Market are the workers themselves, but they cannot buy what their own hands have made."

She goes on to ask, "Is it not unjust that the hands of the world are not subject to the will of the workers, but are driven by the blind force of necessity to obey the will of the few? And who are these few? They are themselves the slaves of The Market and the victims of necessity."

Only socialism, she feels, can ensure the prosperity and happiness of all by placing the wealth and the means of creating that wealth in the hands of the producers. Only in this way can equal opportunities be created for all.

In her writings and speeches, either consciously or deliberately, Keller appeals to her audiences by her constant references to physical and mental disability. She uses phrases like, "Handicapping competition",

"The limbs of the world must first be restored", and "In order that no limb may suffer, and that none may keep the others in bondage, the will of the many must become self-conscious and intelligently united."

Her special interest in the welfare of the disabled did not stop at metaphor. She directly links physical disability and its causes to the economic system. In a speech titled "Social Causes of Blindness" she blames "ignorance, poverty, and the unconscious cruelty of our commercial society. These are the causes of much blindness, these are the enemies which destroy the sight of little children and workmen, and undermine the health of mankind. So long as these enemies remain unvanquished, so long will there be crippled men and women. It is not enough that the surgeon can prevent or alleviate this or that individual case. We must strive to put an end to the conditions which cause disease and accidents."

She saw that as long as unemployment exists, the disabled will be the first to suffer, and unemployment will continue to exist so long as capitalism and the present economic system continue to exist. In an essay titled "The Unemployed", the ideas are as relevant today as they were then. She writes, "Our present system of production necessitates a large margin of idle men. The business world in which we live cannot give every man opportunity to fulfill his capabilities or even assure him continuous employment—the lands and the factories, that is, the tools of labour, are in the hands of a minority of the people and are rather used with a view to increasing the owners' profits than with a view to keeping all men busy and productive. Hence there are more men than jobs. This is the first and chief of evil of the so-called capitalist system of production. The worker has nothing to sell but his labour. He is in strife, in rivalry with his fellows for a chance to sell his trowel. Naturally, the weaker is thrust aside."



**MARITIME WALLPAPER  
& PAINT STORES LTD.**

6438 Quinpool Rd. 422-8389  
335 Herring Cove Rd. 477-4647







BEAVER FOODS

# Beaver

Food Service Management & Consultants  
for Universities, Hospitals, Homes for the Aged,  
in Plant Feedings, Office Cafeterias,  
Construction Camps & High Schools

**"FOR INFORMATION CALL"**  
**BEAVER FOODS LTD**

Atlantic Region (902) 423-8261  
Central and Western Canada (519) 455-9900

More directly to the question of the high unemployment rate of the handicapped she writes "In a small corner of this vast social distress we find our unemployed blind. Their lack of sight is not the primary cause of their idleness, but it relegates them to the enormous army of the unwilling idle. We can subsidize the work of the sightless, we can build special institutions and factories for them, and solicit the help of wealthy patrons. But the blind man cannot become an independent, self-supporting member of society, he can never do all that he is capable of, until all his seeing brothers have opportunities to work to the full extent of their ability. The facts which spread before us show us that it is not physical blindness, but social blindness, which cheats our hands of the right to toil."

Helen Keller's socialism was never narrow or sectarian. She could not tolerate the narrowness of Social Democracy or the unswerving obedience demanded by the orthodox Marxists. Unsuccessfully she asked socialists to put aside their sectarian differences in the name of social revolution. In retrospect, perhaps this is a little naive, but she was motivated by her own optimism and high minded idealism that could allow no petty quarrels to stand in the way of the establishment of her socialist dream, and she believed that only through unity could there be the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system and the realization of that dream. ●

## THEY FACE THE PUBLIC

SYDNEY, N.S.—During the school year 1978/79, Community Involvement for the Disabled has been running a face to face public relations project called "Grow to Know Our Disabled". A blind person, an amputee, and a paraplegic have been going to public schools to give the kids lecture demonstrations of the capabilities of the handicapped, and then fielding questions from the audience. In addition they ask the students to fill our questionnaires. As to be expected, the project has run into hostility and indifference from some students, but by and large they have found that a direct, honest approach, has brought them a lot of positive reaction. Perhaps earth shaking changes can't be expected from projects like this, but it's sure an improvement over the anonymous and somewhat ominous poster campaign approach offered by the agencies.

This project is a Canada Works Grant, and like all the other similar grants, is non-renewable. Nonetheless, they don't want their experience in the field to be lost in a filing cabinet somewhere, so if you have a similar project in mind, or just want to find out what results they have been getting in Sydney, why not contact Community Involvement for the Disabled, Box 571, Sydney, Nova Scotia. B1P 6H4. ●

## HOW ABOUT A HYMN SING?

Are you among the countless thousands that enjoy a good, old-fashioned hymn sing. If so you should join one of Metro's biggest radio audiences and Rob Smith Sunday morning's at 9:05 a.m. until 9:30 a.m. for "Inspiration From The Heart". After that you can settle into CFDR's easy listening pattern for the rest of the day. When it comes to radio you can't beat 680 and it now reaches through most of Nova Scotia.

# CFDR 680

Nova Scotia's Most Powerful Radio Voice!



HV1624

c.2

K282 Ridley, Peter.

R438 HELEN KELLER - REVOLUTIONARY  
SOCIALIST.

Date Due (1979)


AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR THE BLIND  
15 WEST 16th STREET  
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10011



